

The Equine in Athenian Imagination: Art and Archeology

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Introduction

The ancient Athenians displayed great admiration for horses through their sculpture, carvings, and pottery. The Parthenon Frieze, subjectively the most well-known piece of ancient Greek history, depicts over 200 horses and their handlers in its carvings. The famous Agora was also embellished with dedications to Athenian horsemen from war or equestrian sports. Pottery shows horses used for cavalry, hunting, and sport, as well as the horses' regular care. However, the horses' meaning in the Athenian mind stretches far beyond their daily physical use and practices. The equine also held numerous divine representations and symbols to the Athenians, demonstrated through items like vases and puzzling Athenian burials. One central question arises when diving into the countless horse-related archeological discoveries from Greece; What was the meaning of the equine in Athenian imagination?

Horses in Daily Life

Horses were owned within Athens and throughout ancient Greece, though some areas, such as Thessaly, were more well-known for their horse breeding and training talent. Horses were expensive to purchase and keep in ancient Athens due to the need for pasture space with natural roughage, which many areas in Greece did not possess. These high expenses meant only Athens' wealthier citizens could afford to rear horses. In Solon-reformed Athens, the second highest social class was explicitly known as the *hippeus* or cavalrymen/horse owners. Athenian equestrians desired careful breeding as a stocky, short-backed horse was necessary to navigate

their rocky terrain. The horses they bred were smaller than most horses today, many of them being under 14 hands. In today's classification, anything under 14.2 hands is now considered a pony. The smaller size was most likely beneficial for effortless mounting from the ground, and they called for fewer nutrients than larger horses. This shorter horse is recognizable in many pieces depicting horses and riders.

A great example would be the Attic black-figure vase from the Kerameikos Museum that displays a soldier mounting his steed (see image 1). The soldier, carrying two spears and a shield, raises his outside leg towards the horse. He wears a crested helmet, and the handle of a sword can be seen on his inside hip. The horse stands, his head and neck high, lined with a docked mane, preparing for the soldier's weight. The wither of the horse only reaches the soldier's chest. It is also essential to notice that the horse does not wear a saddle or stirrups. A shorter horse allows the rider to mount without stirrups or a leg-up from another individual.

Horses had many uses within Athenian society, such as transportation, sports competitions, hunting, and cavalry. These equine activities were a common subject in Attic pottery. However, it was not only these vibrant scenes that fascinated the Greeks. Many vase representations feature imagery of relaxed horses being cared for by grooms. For example, a black figure amphora from the Tampa Museum of Art depicts a youth grooming a horse with a curry comb (see image 2). It is stylized with the legs and pasterns of the horse dramatically thin, its neck extremely muscular, and muzzle pointed. The eyes of both the boy and the horse are large. The horse stands proud, his head high, while the boy stands behind the horse's shoulder. His left arm rests upon the horse's wither, and his right arm raises the brush to his face. He blows the dust off the brush. A similar grooming scene is featured on a kylix from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see image 3). The figures in this style are more realistic than the last, with the

proportions of the groom and horse being more accurate to life. The groom in this image is very similar to the youth in the previous one, but his face looks towards the head of the horse, and he holds the brush in his left hand. He, too, is blowing the dust off the brush. These artworks are great examples of the impeccable care the Greeks provided to their horses. Many of the Greeks' preferred care methods were outlined in detail by Xenophon in his literature, *The Art of Horsemanship*. He explains that if the owner had hired a groom, they should be tasked with brushing the horse. His description of adequately cleaning the horse suggests that the groom stands near the horse's shoulder out of kicking range. This position can be seen in both images of the grooms discussed above. This great care allowed the Greeks to produce some of the most impressive sport and cavalry horses in history, which is why they may have interpreted it in their art.

Athenian Warhorses

Cavalry was one of the significant uses of horses in ancient Greece. A speedy, muscular weapon that could force its way through enemy lines proved efficient to numerous armies. Athens was late in constructing a cavalry formation, but when it did, it involved many thorough measures to ensure it was top-quality. Among these measures was an in-depth inspection of the horses planned to be used in war. These examined various parts of the horse to determine if it was fit for cavalry work. Horses deemed a good match were marked with a brand, such as a thunderbolt, a trident, or a dolphin. Evidence of these inspections was found in and around a well near the Dipylon courtyard entering Athens. Tightly folded lead tablets with inscriptions depicting the inspected horses' details. In his lecture (2022), Glenn Bugh pointed out that the inscriptions on the interior side included the horses' colors, some depicting chestnut, black, bay,

white, and spotted horses. As well as the color, the horses' brand, and their value in drachmas were also mentioned. Glenn Bugh stated that the most expensive horses found on the tablets were up to 1200 drachmas, and the lowest price was 100 drachmas. These price differences would suggest the large array of horses that were inspected. The most expensive being quality bred and highly trained steeds, and the least costly being closer to an older, more withered horse. On the outside of the folded tablet was the owner's name. These may have been kept as a record for the future sale of the horse or to cover the cost of a horse lost in war. This discovery proves the importance of steeds in the Athenian cavalry formation. They carefully chose each horse post-inspection to ensure their cavalry would excel.

Equine Monumental Sculpture

As discussed, horses were frequent subjects in Kylix, amphora, and other pottery works. However, their presence continued to large, monumental sculptures carved in marble or cast in bronze. A magnificent example is the Medici Riccardi Horse Head, a Hellenistic sculpture dating back to roughly 340 B.C. This piece is a life-sized horse head constructed of bronze (see image 4). The horse has a short thick neck, lined with a neatly roached mane, and a forelock that appears tied up between his ears. Each side of the mane has carefully detailed hairs that give the impression of regrowth where the mane was trimmed. One ear is back, the other forward. His mouth is open, nostrils flaring, suggesting the horse is fired up or working hard. There is what appears to be the bar of a bit in his mouth being pulled back with the action of collecting, a common position for horses in Greek art. Prominent veins are seen on the horse's face, and incredibly clear skin folds behind the jawbone where the neck is flexing. The large neck and pronounced veins suggest that this sculpture was intended to be a stallion, and the roached main

indicates that it is a working horse, most likely a war stallion. Mario Iozzo (2022), director of the National Archeological Museum of Florence, pointed out in his lecture that the sculpture has a few markings indicating that, at one point, it was wearing a classic Greek bridal. This bridal would have been decorated with metal rosettes where the various straps met or on the front of the face for decoration. This could have been what created the marks. The horse's head would have once been connected to a whole body but has since been lost during its travels through history. This piece reveals a high level of realism, demonstrating the Greeks' desire to capture the horses' beauty through their artwork. It shows great attention to detail and care in their wanted representation of horses.

Horses in Architectural Sculpture

Many buildings in ancient Athens were decorated with horses, in either a fictional event, a representation of an actual occurrence, to convey a message, or simply for beauty. Perhaps one of Athens' most famous buildings features many horses on its frieze alongside gods. The Parthenon frieze displays over 270 horses (Neils, 2006) and their handlers in beautiful carvings that many believe are the epitome of high classical style. Both ridden and charioted horses take up the north and south sides of the frieze, with some mounted and unmounted on the west section of the frieze. Horses take up most of the subject matter on the frieze, with almost half being horsemen.

The horses appear small and athletic with roached manes and longer forelocks. The roached manes help exaggerate the large cresty necks, a desirable trait in horses recommended by Xenophon. The horses are in a pose comparable to the high classical dressage pose performed

by Lipizzaner stallions today called the Levade. In this movement, the horse balances at a forty-five-degree angle on its hocks, with its front legs elevated and neck arched. This position requires extensive training and strength of the horse. Xenophon states this position is that of a highly trained horse and confident rider that catches the eyes of those near. The artwork on the Parthenon Frieze shows the horse in the Greeks' idealized position, whether to catch the eye of those who view it or to brag about their well-trained steeds and excellent horsemen. Their decision to include horses and handlers, alongside gods, on one of their most impressive buildings conveys their level of importance to the Athenians. The horses' pose shifts a remarkable prestige to their rider, one that many Athenians craved.

Horses in the Agora

The Athenian Agora was a common location for many equestrian competitions. The winners of these events would be honored with a monument or art pieces that would boast their glory to the public. The dedications would be displayed throughout the Agora. An example of an equestrian monument would be the one discovered near the Stoa Poikile, at the north end of the Agora. This piece illustrates a simulated cavalry fight. These cavalry fights would involve two teams in a mock battle, displaying their skilled equitation to the audience. The section of the relief shows four horses in the same levade pose pictured on the Agora. Their riders wear robes, and some wear helmets, their hands rested at the horses' withers as they calmly ride their spirited steeds. On the reverse side of this piece is an inscription that reads "LEONTIS ENIKA," suggesting that the winner of this event could have been the Leonitis tribe. Horse riders were recognized as skilled athletes and honored with art pieces that exhibited the high-status horses, and their riders held within Athenian society.

Horses and Funeral Sculpture

Horses also appeared on funeral sculptures to honor and represent those who passed away. In ancient Athens, family and friends would commission artwork such as a statue or a stele to remember the deceased individual. The Dexileos stele is a well-known example of an Athenian funerary monument created to honor one of their cavalry soldiers. This 4th-century piece was found in the Dipylon cemetery and currently resides at the Kerameikos Museum. The memorial depicts a young soldier dressed in a robe and cape. He throws a spear at a fallen enemy soldier who cowers nude beneath the horse's legs. The horse is in the classic Levade position. The whole monument is topped with a triangular pediment. Horses in action were rare on funeral stele during the fourth century, making this a unique piece. The horse's strength underneath a stern-faced rider elevates his power over the exposed, nude individual below. It represents the incredible power and stature the Greeks believed horses transferred to their rider. This power is obviously a characteristic the family of Dexileos wanted to highlight.

The Equine in Myth and Religion

One reason outside of tangible views that may explain the Greeks' desire for the equine is their extensive connection to their gods. Their myths depict horses acting as emissaries for humans to communicate with the gods or presenting as god-like creatures themselves. This religious affiliation to the gods is represented in many ancient Greek artworks. It was the god Poseidon that was credited with the creation of horses. The myth begins with Poseidon endeavoring to woo Demeter, who, to deny him, tasked him to create the most beautiful creature

on the earth, believing it was an impossible mission. Poseidon eventually returned with a magnificent herd of horses. Poseidon is frequently illustrated alongside horse-like sea creatures in Attic pottery and is the father of a few mythical steeds. A sample of this pottery is the Attic drinking cup from roughly 500 B.C., currently residing at the British Museum (see image 5). This black figure piece shows Poseidon with a long white beard, holding a trident, seated on a sea creature. The front of the sea creature is a horse with a white blaze. Its mane is orange-brown and neatly docked. At the shoulder of the creature, the horse head and chest turn into what resembles an eel. The tail slowly thins out and sprouts into an end comparable to a dolphin's tail.

Another god frequently depicted alongside horses is Athena. Athena was accredited with the creation of the bridal as she gifted a golden bridle to Bellerophon to help tame the famous, uncontrollable Pegasus. Athena is usually illustrated in a chariot of three or four horses. For example, look at the Archaic black-figure Dinos, signed by Sophilos (see image 6). This depicts two figures in a chariot; the labels *Artemis* and *Athena* above identify them. They are being pulled by a four-horse chariot, three black and one white; their necks are arched in collection. This piece is currently located in the British Museum.

As mentioned previously, one of the most famous godly equines is Pegasus. Pegasus is said to be a white, winged horse born from the blood of the Gorgon Medusa after it dropped into the sea. Pegasus is featured on many coins and pottery from ancient Greece. On a piece in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, a 320 B.C.E. Patera depicts the winged horse. He is painted white and gold and is posed in the Levade. His wings extend from his shoulders and up his sides.

These depictions are just a few of the many god and horse combinations discovered in ancient Greek artifacts. The ability to communicate with the gods and present as divine beings raises the question, is this the incentive for Athenian admiration of the horse? Perhaps by

featuring it on many of their artistic and architectural depictions, they were honoring the horse, similarly to how they would honor and illustrate their gods.

Horse Burials

Many accounts in ancient literature state the importance of giving the dead an appropriate burial in ancient Greece. Even those in war were advised to grant their enemies a burial. It is through burials, or lack thereof, that we can identify the state of society when the individual was buried. If no burials occurred, there would be dire circumstances to warrant why. The burial process involved various steps in preparing the body, grieving, and transporting the body to the final area of burial. If the deceased were a horse owner, their horse would be included in the transportation stage of the burial and then be sacrificed and laid to rest with its owner in the grave. During an excavation in Thermes, evidence of these horse-human burials was unearthed. The grave of a hoplite soldier holding two swords by his sides was found. Just above this burial, the skeleton of a horse was found. The hoplite and the horse were positioned so that their heads were close. The horse's head was placed on a stone just above the hoplite, almost as if he had a pillow to rest on. The horse was roughly 14 hands and thought to be a young war stallion. The great care of the positioning of this grave illustrates the great love Greek soldiers held for their horses. Perhaps due to the expense and religious aspect, or possibly the intense bond they would have gained through entrusting each other during the most frightening times.

Athenian Horse Burials

Athens had its fair share of these war horse burials, yet others unearthed proved more puzzling. One of the most recent finds during an excavation near Athens was the Phaleron Horses. These horses were discovered at a port in ancient Athens called Phaleron. The horses found in this burial were believed to be specifically selected for sacrifice. The large canine teeth in the skulls of these remains suggest that these horses were stallions, and the short length of the teeth with a lack of a Galvin's groove proves they were young at the time of death. In his lecture, Flint Dibble (2022) pointed out that some fuller skeletons have cut marks on their bones. He suggested that these marks may have come from attempting to position the body in a desired way. After the hardening of the muscles after death, they would have had to cut various ligaments to pose the horse. Most of the horses discovered depict a similar pose. The front legs bent slightly under the horse's chest, and the back legs extended. Another interesting observation by Dibble is that the horses' tails stick straight out as if they were in motion. These horses were found alongside humans, though not in the same burial.

The position of one of the most well-preserved skeletons was fascinating. This carefully positioned pose inspired me to explore it in more detail. I began by sketching the horse's skeleton using a reference photo to produce a more defined view of the exact position of each horse bone (see image 8). Using this skeleton sketch, I drew the horse's body in the same position to visualize what the Greeks may have seen when they buried the horse (see images 9 and 10). After seeing the rough image of the position of the horse's body, not just the skeleton, this position is reminiscent of the Levade discussed previously. This is the same pose Xenophon described as desirable and has been featured in countless pieces depicting horses in motion. Was this the position that the ancient Greeks were aiming for? When comparing it to the Levade, the only difference is the straightness of the back legs and less bend in the horse's spine. These

differences may have been due to the hardening of the body, evident from the cuts mentioned earlier. Perhaps this pose was chosen to reflect the most desirable position of the horse in the Greek mind for a religious event or as a reflection of the well-bred steeds in Athens.

What Does the Horse Represent in Athenian Imagination: Conclusion

Circling back to the original inquiry, what does the horse represent in ancient Athenian imagination? From the evidence discussed, it is recognizable that the most prominent representation of the horse in Athens would be its physical symbolization, the image of wealth and strength it passes on to its owner. The sheer expense to own and dedication to training displays to others the wealth, power, and patience the owner holds to maintain this horse. Horses required expensive, man-grown nutrition and constant attention in grooming and training. This means the owner would have possessed a respectable amount of dedication for the animal or maintained the wealth to employ a groom. Owning a horse signified power and bravery, especially if the owner was a soldier who fought upon their mount or an athlete who triumphed in an equestrian competition.

However, much evidence established the far more underlying representation of horses in Athens outside of physical ownership and control. The equines' affiliation with ancient Greek myth and religion has proved notable. As stated previously, horses were a creation provided by Poseidon, deemed the most beautiful creature on earth within the myth. Gods being associated with, or taking the form of horses, could explain the Athenians' diligent care for their equines. Depicting horses on monumental buildings devoted to gods, such as the Parthenon horses and the Parthenon's dedication to Athena, proves the horses' divine eminence in the minds of the

Athenians. Finally, including horses in one of the most important traditions of honoring the dead during burial eminently displays their spiritual significance.

They cherished the equines form profoundly and expressed it in vast detail in monumental statues, pottery, and architectural sculpture. In several pieces that included horses in motion, they maintained the common Levade stance to accentuate the horses' most desirable features. Time was dedicated to the study and perfection of this pose to portray their ideal equine conformation.

The Athenian desire for horses may have stemmed from their representations within myth and religion. Or perhaps they fell in love with horses prior to myths and religion, which sparked their fascination and desire to portray them in art and belief. Regardless of the actual origins of the horse in ancient Athens, its representation within their imagination was indeed eloquent.

Images:



Image 1:

Credit: War Horse (hippos.gr)

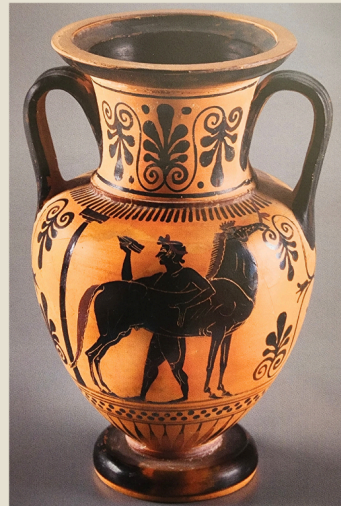


Image 2:

Credit: Tampa Museum of Art, The Horse in Ancient Greek Art (2017)



Image 3:

Credit: Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Horse in Ancient Greek Art (2017)



Image 4 :

Credit: Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Toscana, artsy.net

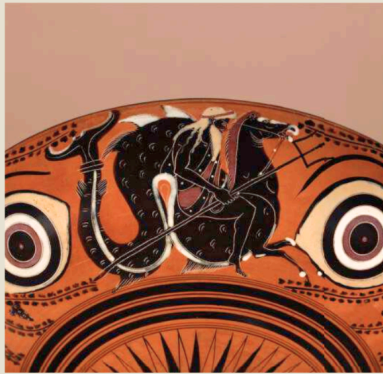


Image 5:

Credit: The British Museum.org



Image 6:

Credit: Retrieved from Artemis, Athena & the Moirae - Ancient Greek Vase Painting (theoi.com) at The British Museum.org



Image 7:

Credit: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, The Horse in Ancient Greek Art (2017)

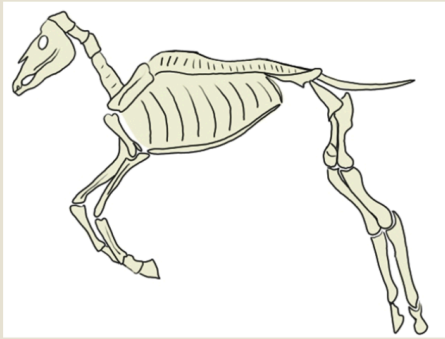


Image 8:
Credit: Mia Boyce (2023)

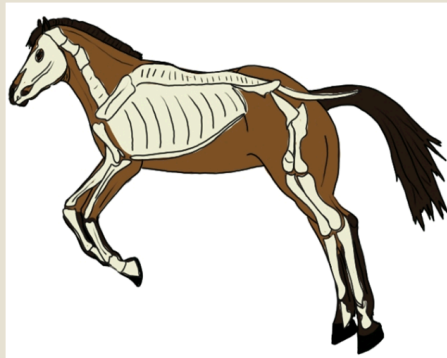


Image 9:
Credit: Mia Boyce (2023)

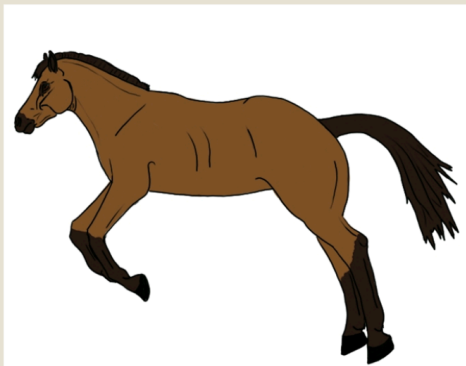


Image 10:
Credit: Mia Boyce (2023)

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